NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE WAR ON TERRORISM:

AMERICA'S ACHILLES' HEEL

OLLEN R. RICHEY
5602
THE NATURE OF WAR
SEMINAR C

PROFESSOR
LIEUTENANT COLONEL ROBERT TOGUCHI

ADVISOR
COLONEL DANIEL CUSHING

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
2002		**00-00-2002 to 00-00-2002**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
Public Support for the War on Terrorism: America's Achilles' Heel	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**		**10**	

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE WAR ON TERRORISM:

AMERICA'S ACHILLES' HEEL

On October 11, 2001, President George W. Bush held his first prime time news conference since assuming office to describe America's nascent War on Terrorism. In his opening statement and responses to questions he emphasized the nation's commitment to a "sustained campaign to drive the terrorists out of their hidden caves and to bring them to justice." He also described parallel campaigns to aggressively pursue "agents of terror around the world" and strengthen "our protections here at home." While his resolve was evident, the deep anxiety that troubled him personally and the entire nation was also conspicuous as he labored to describe the uncertain road ahead.

America had been compelled to embark on a war unlooked for, a war for which the rules have not been written. The disturbing nature of that new conflict was poignantly illustrated at the end of the press conference when the president looked into the camera and announced the creation of the Afghanistan Children's Fund and enlisted the support of America's own children. The sobering symbolism of the initiative was not widely perceived, yet the president's message was clear. In the aftermath of September 11th, every citizen—man, woman, and child—is now a foot soldier in a war that will be waged, in large part, on American soil and on that of her allies. Consequently, the tangible cost of the conflict will be borne, most conspicuously, by civilians around the world. The pressure that that reality exerts on the U.S. and on its coalition partners cannot be underestimated.

Unlike our own strategists who struggle to identify the enemy's strengths and weaknesses, Osama Bin Laden has long understood America's Achilles' heel. In a video first aired October 7th on the Al Jazeera network, Bin Laden applauded the September attacks and proclaimed that, "The winds of change have come to eradicate oppression." His message, although cloaked in religious metaphor, was as clear as that of President Bush, "neither America nor the people who live in it will dream of security before we live it in Palestine, and not before all the infidel armies leave the land of Muhammad." Attempts to suppress airing of the Bin Laden statement reveal the administration's awareness of the potential persuasiveness of the Al Qaeda position. In what is in essence a psychological war—a war of ideas—in which progress will be largely immeasurable, success difficult to define, and public opinion acutely susceptible to manipulation, perception management will be a critical capability for all antagonists.

As the fourth week of coalition operations in Afghanistan draw to a close and the number of Anthrax infections in America grows, it would seem that the administration does not yet fully comprehend the war's nature and has failed to heed Clausewitz's admonition that "the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish…the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature." In light of that failure, the question that must be asked is: Can Bush maintain international and public support for the ambitious war he has described?

Early international support for the war effort has been broad, but the unique character of the undertaking promises to exacerbate those tensions that test any coalition. Magnified as well are the religious and ideological issues that are at the heart of the

conflict. The conditional support granted by certain countries and the ambiguous cooperation of allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia illustrates the conflict of interests that complicate a multilateral response to Islamic extremism. Nevertheless, maintenance of a robust coalition that includes at least limited Muslim representation is politically essential; the president's determination to wage war unilaterally if obliged notwithstanding.

Every coalition partner, of course, is compelled to first protect its own interests. In this case, that requirement places significant pressure on even sympathetic countries with large Muslim populations. The character of the strategy pursued thus far has increased that pressure. The obvious irony of the situation is that our attempt to destroy the principal state sponsor of Al Qaeda contributes directly to Bin Laden's efforts to polarize the coalition along religious lines. For many Muslims and other critics of U.S. foreign policy, our massive conventional military response and strategically dubious objective of unseating the Taliban demonstrates convincingly American imperialism and high-handedness.

Attempts to portray the campaign as a war on terrorism vice a war against Islam will prove ineffective among large segments of the Arab and Muslim world pre-disposed to cast the conflict in religious and ideological terms. The children's fund and other publicity stunts as well as the distribution of rations to starving Afghan civilians will mitigate neither the negative impact of collateral damage nor our adversaries' efforts to vilify our actions through propaganda and misinformation. In that regard they have already succeeded and the shockwaves of Muslim opposition to U.S. actions continue to reverberate around the world.

Particularly disturbing to many countries in and around Central Asia is the character of our emerging relationship with Pakistan. Musharraf's support of coalition operations has revitalized Islamic fundamentalists opposed to his secular regime and the promise of dramatically increased American support has aggravated the tenuous state of India-Pakistan relations. Indeed, the entire region is now a tinderbox of complex and poorly understood ethnic, religious, and nationalist tensions, which our presence may ultimately ignite. As well, Chinese concerns regarding U.S. military presence so close to its western provinces and distrust of warming Russia-U.S. relations further complicate the maintenance of the geopolitical balance. While an optimist may point to strategic opportunities in the offing, the realist is obliged to conclude that extended American involvement in the region is fraught with difficulty.

As it has been for more than fifty years, the nexus of America's Middle East foreign policy conundrum remains the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Before the September attacks, the peace process lay in tatters and tensions had risen to the highest levels seen in recent years. In their aftermath, despite the acknowledgment of both Israeli and Palestinian officials that restraint is essential, the assassination of Rehaven Ze'evi, subsequent occupation of Palestinian-ruled areas by Israeli forces, and acute escalation of violence demonstrates the volatility of the situation. America's awkward involvement in that conflict, its decade-long containment of Iraq, and protracted military presence throughout the Persian Gulf are clearly the proximate causes of Al Qaeda aggression.

The factors described above, in concert with myriad indefinable variables and opaque linkages that compound the conduct of any war will sorely test the resiliency of the anti-terrorism coalition. More important, however, will be the pressures exerted by

the internal constituencies of coalition partners if they, too, become victims of terrorist attacks. The probability of such attacks is high and a systematic effort on the part of Al Qaeda, its sympathizers, or radical opportunists to weaken the resolve of coalition partners must be anticipated. Sustained coalition participation—beyond that of the core players—will be difficult to maintain.

As vital as coalition support is to the war effort, domestic public support is the ultimate determinant of success or failure and, therefore, the key element of the American strategic calculus. In this instance especially the public's perception of the conflict and analysis of cost and benefit will be decisive. Already, a mere six weeks since the September attacks and the confident pronouncements of resolve that followed it, hairline cracks in the foundation of support are evident.

The destruction of the World Trade Center and the Anthrax scare are lethal precedents that have forever changed the terrorism paradigm. Attacks of mass destruction, casualties, and disruption are now legitimated for international and domestic terrorist groups alike and Americans wait anxiously for the next demonstration of horror. Their reaction to the Anthrax scare suggests the effect that additional major attacks may have. Despite the handful of deaths and low probability of exposure, the use of Anthrax has mutated the public's perception of the war and increased their already deep sense of vulnerability. Avoiding air travel, conspicuous landmarks, and major public events now seem inadequate precautions when the specter of bio-terrorism lurks in every mailbox.

The source of this newest expression of terror has not yet been revealed, but intelligence and law enforcement officials consider the possibility of domestic terrorism viable. If that is the case, it is a disturbing complication and poignant illustration of the

unpredictability of the new security environment. Regardless of the attack's origin, its character and dramatic exploitation of the current situation reveals the strategic acumen of its architect. By targeting the media and government he has effectively distorted the objectivity of these traditionally well-insulated and influential opinion makers.

The Bush Administration now walks an exceedingly fine line. Public confidence in the government's ability to defend the nation has been eroded by the missteps that have plagued the handling of the Anthrax scare. Americans now question the accuracy of Center for Disease Control and Postal Service warnings and guidelines. Neither are they impressed by cockpit videos of precision target destruction. The inconsistency of Department of Defense statements five days after the military campaign in Afghanistan was launched noting that viable targets were already limited and recent declarations that the Taliban had proved tougher than expected does little to inspire confidence. Public faith in the government's efforts will be further diminished if the president is unable to produce convincing evidence of tangible results. More important, he must convince the public of the government's capacity to protect it. That promises to be his greatest challenge. A CBS poll conducted 29 October revealed that just eighteen percent of respondents believed that the government is capable of ensuring their safety.

A phenomenon often examined in discussions of public will is America's perceived aversion to friendly casualties. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Americans are willing to accept high casualty rates among its armed forces when the stakes are considered high as they are now. Yet as President Bush and others from the administration have noted, in this war the brunt of casualties will be borne by civilians. Their capacity to endure repeated attacks is unknown, but it is certainly finite. In time,

should domestic casualty figures grow and the economy continue to decline—as both are likely to do—public support for the war will be sorely tested.

Because its psychological nature is antithetical to American sensibilities, the Bush Administration will fail to maintain domestic popular and coalition support for the War on Terrorism—so long as it pursues its current strategy. The predictable reliance on familiar formulas—conventional military operations, regime change, and nation building—reflects a lack of strategic insight and imagination. By miscasting its objectives, the administration has jeopardized the war effort. It is reasonable to assume that the American people will eventually challenge the logic of a protracted war in Central Asia when the clear and present danger is here. The idling cynicism of a disoriented public will be replaced by unbridled criticism of the government should terrorist attacks continue to claim the lives of non-combatants.

Sustainment of an enduring multidimensional anti-terrorism campaign will rest on the administration's ability to manage social unrest, bureaucratic dissonance, and, most important, public opinion. Success in such an endeavor begins with the artful determination of objectives in the context of both internal and external perception management requirements. The administration must acknowledge that fundamental requirement and revise its strategy—ends, ways, and means—accordingly. Simply put, it must abandon the impractical objective of replacing the Taliban and shift emphasis to the challenges of homeland security while proceeding concurrently with essential intelligence, law enforcement, and military activities directed squarely at the source of the immediate threat.

The quick amendment of the Quadrennial Defense Review Report to recognize emergent homeland defense requirements reflects some appreciation of the nature of the conflict. The appointment of former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge as the Director of Homeland Security and the Anti-Terrorism legislation signed by the president on October 26th are significant steps in the right direction, but much more is required. Creation of a unified homeland defense command organized as an interagency entity capable of effective integration of federal, state, and local activities is long overdue. Efficient immigration policies and effective border control and coastal security are essential. Enhanced transportation security, practical warning and alert systems, large-scale consequence management capabilities, and aggressive disease control practices to include mass immunization of high-risk occupations are also required. These and many other measures are necessary to convince Americans that their government has done everything practical to ensure their safety. They are the arbiters of this conflict and will define success in terms of what doesn't happen—a repeat of September 11th.

Military action must remain a key component of a multidimensional response, but the destruction of the Taliban is not the solution. While such a strategy directly attacks the enemy's center of gravity it does so at the expense of our own. Although an improbable victory in Afghanistan might neutralize Al Qaeda elements based there, it would not eliminate that global organization or its many sponsors and sympathizers. Moreover, the risks of such a campaign are tremendous. It unnecessarily exposes our weaknesses, jeopardizes the coalition, dilutes our effort, and threatens to destroy international and domestic support for the war. A more viable course of action is to combat terrorism asymmetrically, surgically, and covertly. Direct special operations

conducted in concert with domestic and international intelligence and law enforcement agencies to eliminate terrorist leaders, active cells, sponsors, training facilities, safe houses, weapon caches, etc.—wherever they are found—is a far more practical, effective, and sustainable approach than is massive intervention in Afghanistan.

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson lamented that, "The weakest chink in our armor is American public opinion. Our people won't stand firm in the face of heavy losses, and they can bring down the government." The beleaguered president was referring to the Vietnam War, but the sentiment is doubly true today. Bin Laden, like Ho Chi Minh before him, has recognized the truth in Johnson's words and has effectively focused his limited resources with them in mind. He knows that no amount of flag waving, patriotic pronouncements, or government assurances will mitigate the terror induced by systematic attacks on American soil. Should the United States fail to grasp the nature of the war Bin Laden has defined and protect its own center of gravity, defeat—measured in terms of increased vulnerability, domestic tragedy, military failure, social unrest, retrenchment, and isolation—is inevitable.